



**FOCUS ON
MELBOURNE**

VICTORIA'S SECRETS

MELBOURNE is regarded as the cultural hub of this country, and here are a variety of reasons why.

BY DOV KORNITS

At the recent 10th anniversary of Melbourne's Docklands Studios, Louise Asher, Victorian Minister for Innovations, Services and Small Business made a bold claim. "The studio is incredibly important to the state's vibrant screen industry, which generates \$1.4 billion annually for the Victorian economy, and provides 10,000 creative full time jobs." A few weeks later, The Federal Government made cuts to Screen Australia's funding, and the ABC, one of the big producers of local television content, had its budget cut by 1% over the next four years.

Thankfully, the Victorian Liberal Government is playing to a different tune when it comes to acknowledging the need for support in order to maintain and build an infrastructure for the thousands of people invested in the film and television industry in this country. "We regard the studios as a very important part of Victoria's economic infrastructure," Asher states. "Since 2004, productions that have been shot at the studios have contributed well over half a billion dollars to the Victorian economy. International productions that have been shot at the studios delivered us \$351 million, and domestic productions shot here have spent over \$278 million worth. I give you these figures not simply because I'm an economic narc and love talking about economic value, but in today's debate about where jobs are coming from in the state of Victoria, it's important for government and members of the public to realise the very significant economic contribution of this industry to the state of Victoria." It seems that their strategy is working, not only keeping local filmmakers and technicians at home, but also attracting them from overseas and even interstate.

Lizette Atkins, originally from Sydney, is a producer who runs Unicorn Films. Her past credits include the documentaries, *Lionel*, *Rock N Roll Nerd*, and *Aim High In Creation*, and the feature film, *X*. "It's very collegiate," Atkins comments about Melbourne. "We have a women producers' group here. There are about fifteen of us and four times a year, we all get together to have dinner and

swap war stories. We're not really competing against each other because each project stands on its own merits. I love that about Melbourne. I'm not saying that it doesn't happen in other places, but in Melbourne, it is possible, because there's a strong community." Coming up for Atkins are documentaries with George Gittoes, Jeff Daniels, and Rohan Spong; Jon Hewitt's *Turkey Shoot* remake, which she associate produced; Sue Brooks' *Looking For Grace*, which has Miranda Otto, Richard Roxburgh and Sam Neill attached; Matthew Saville's *Kid Snowball*; *Ruins Of Love* by Ben Hackworth; and *Night Flower*, which will mark the directorial debut of acclaimed writer, David Scinto (*Sexy Beast*), starring Ray Winstone and to be shot in the UK. "It will redefine horror in the same way that *Sexy Beast* redefined the gangster movie," Atkins predicts.

Although the nature of the film industry at the moment means that Atkins can end up making a film anywhere in the world, the fact that her base is in Melbourne means that she is more likely to contribute to the local economy. This is evidenced by the number of films that she has had as part of Melbourne International Film Festival's (MIFF) Premiere Fund, and the number in the works. "The Premiere Fund is incredibly important, because it's another door to go through in terms of financing," she says about the initiative of The Victorian Government, which sees funding go towards films that have been produced in Victoria in some capacity, and that will world premiere at MIFF.

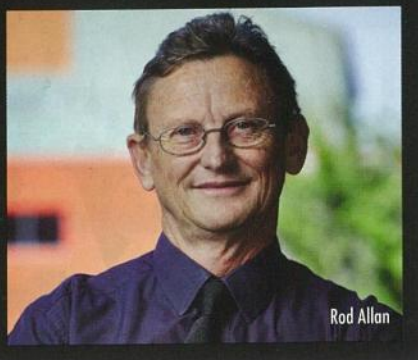
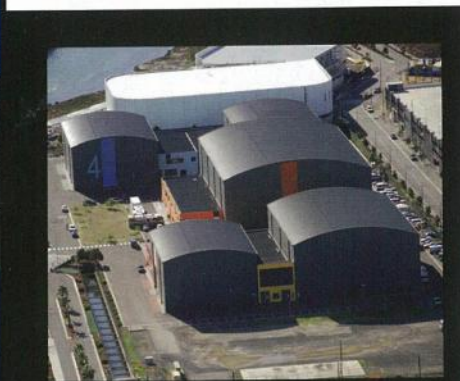
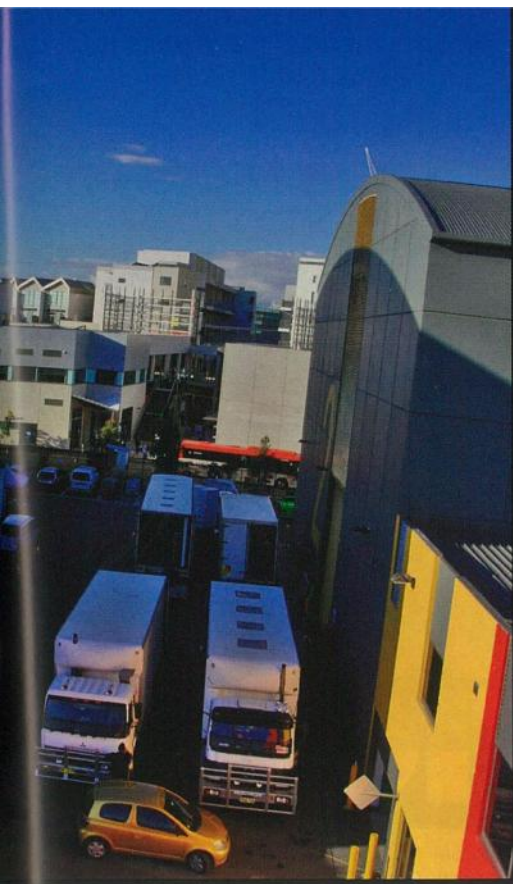
This year's Premiere Fund will see the release of Kriv Stenders' *Kill Me Three Times*, starring Simon Pegg; Tony Ayres' thriller *Cut Snake*; Mark Hartley's *Electric Boogaloo: The Wild, Untold Story Of Cannon Films*; *My Mistress*, from director Stephen Lance and starring Emmanuelle Beart, Harrison Gilbertson and Rachael Blake; Ian Pringle's dramatic thriller, *The Legend Maker*; and Robert Connolly's children's film, *Paper Planes*, starring Sam Worthington, David Wenham and Deborah Mailman.

According to state funding body, Film Victoria, there have been 26 feature films and 28 television projects

produced in some capacity in Victoria in 2013-2014. Film-wise, these include everything from the IMAX documentary, *The Earth Wins*, to Kasimir Burgess' *Fell*, which competed for The Sydney Film Prize at The 2014 Sydney Film Festival. TV-wise, there's everything from mainstays such as *Neighbours* and *Offspring*, to telemovies such as the recently screened *Parer's War* and the highly anticipated *The Secret River*. The number of feature films is boosted by the inclusion of "footloose" productions such as *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, which worked with Victoria-based post-house, Luma Pictures, on its complicated visual effects tableaux.

The numbers do not include indie productions such as Jesse O'Brien's *Arrowhead*, a sci-fi thriller which shot its interiors in Melbourne. "We were our own infrastructure," says O'Brien, who is currently deep in post-production. "The story was written for the most part around effects that we knew that we could pull off. The sound design and mix is being outsourced to a great facility in Balaclava, and they've been really accommodating, even in the face of our budget constraints. There's a community of filmmakers here in Melbourne, and a lot of talent and ambition. Open Channel is a fantastic resource for training, and it's great at nurturing its community. We're not lacking at all when it comes to cinematic infrastructure, and enthusiastic crew wanting to learn and grow and work. We have the people and the drive, and we live in the artistic hub of Australia. There are opportunities, and they all start with making those connections within this community."

"Open Channel is a multi-faceted organisation whose role is to support emerging filmmakers, whether they are just starting their career, or are at a more advanced stage of moving into professional practice," explains David Schultheis, Vocational Education and Training Manager at Open Channel, which is positioned at Docklands, adjacent to the studios. "We provide this support through networking amongst peers and industry, professional mentoring, events and initiatives, and training courses



Rod Allan

spanning a wide range of film disciplines. For many filmmakers and crew, we provide the opportunity to create a first project with a broadcast outcome, such as on ABC2 or SBS (NITV), or to be attached to mainstream film and television productions, to help launch careers."

One of these productions that offered hands-on experience to Open Channel members is the feature film, *The Moon And The Sun*, starring Pierce Brosnan, currently being shot at Docklands Studios. "Melbourne was the most aggressive [in courting us], and the studio was the right size for what we needed," states veteran Hollywood producer, Bill Mechanic, who has been nurturing this project for the last thirteen years. "One of my producing partners on this was Paul Currie," he adds about the Australian producer/director who made *One Perfect Day* in 2006, and then moved to America. "I had found some equity, and he was saying, 'You can shoot in Australia, and you can get subsidies out of Australia.' I thought, 'That's a little silly! I'm doing a movie based in Versailles!' I went, 'Okay, let me come and take a look.' So I flew in, and it was right when Baz had finished *The Great Gatsby*, and I met [VFX supervisor] Chris Godfrey, who ended up working on our picture, and we saw how it was made."

On whether our crews match the ones that he's used to working with in America, Mechanic is certain of one thing: "If it's not *better* than the Hollywood talent, then creatively, it's on a par. Lizzy Gardiner on the costumes, Shane Thomas on the make-up, Michelle McGahey on the production design, my AD, Phil Jones... they're all absolutely world class talent." And would he come back? "Absolutely. I have a WW2 picture that will most likely shoot here, and a picture that Paul Currie is going to direct called 2.22."

Docklands Studios CEO, Rod Allan, echoes Mechanic's sentiments. "There's a rich tradition here of making good television and a lot of the early figures of the resurrection of the Australian film industry came from Melbourne," says Allan, who started in the business as a Sydney-

based producer, and was part of the team that set up Fox Studios in the nineties.

Recent productions at Docklands include *I, Frankenstein* and *Predestination*, whilst at the time of our chat, the smaller budget local film, *Sucker*, was shooting there along with the TV drama, *Winners And Losers*, and the audience-based television series, *Millionaire Hot Seat* and *The Footy Show*. In a sentiment echoed by everyone in our industry, from producers to gaffers, the strong Australian dollar of late has had a major impact on attracting good paying overseas production required to maintain employment. "We support AusFilm in its efforts to lobby The Federal Government to increase the Locations Offset," says Rod Allan. "We would then get a lot more footloose international productions. There was a Location Incentive Fund established last year with \$20 million, which was successful in bringing three footloose productions to the country – *Unbroken*, *San Andreas*, and *The Moon And The Sun*. That fund worked to the effect that within nine months, there were three footloose films shooting in the country. So there's no doubt in our mind that if the Location Offset was permanently increased to 30%, we would be attracting a lot more international productions. With the dollar at the height that it is, it does work against us. A better rebate is certainly something that we think is necessary.

"This has always been the centre, and a very strong and proud centre, of Australian production," concludes Rod Allan. "The international visitors really love Melbourne, and everything that it offers outside the business is a bonus. We hear that all the time. It's not necessarily as front-of-mind as a place like Sydney for international visitors, but when they bring productions here and they realise how well they are looked after and serviced in Melbourne, they want to come back." ■



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